Depot Town Rag

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A surfeit of ghastly tales

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Legend, lore, and street talk

Area a breeding ground for Gothic-style tales

Maybe it's the architecture. Or it could just be our long history of colorful characters. But, for sure, the prevalence of morbid and macabre stories from our past has become an important part of the tradition of this old commercial district.

In December 1988, *The Rag* published a twelve-page children's story by Richard Haas that wove popular street legends into a masterful mystery of neighborhood kids on holiday break. The response proved those kids liked tales from the old railroad district just as much as their parents and grandparents had. Now those same "kids" are passing the stories on to their own children.

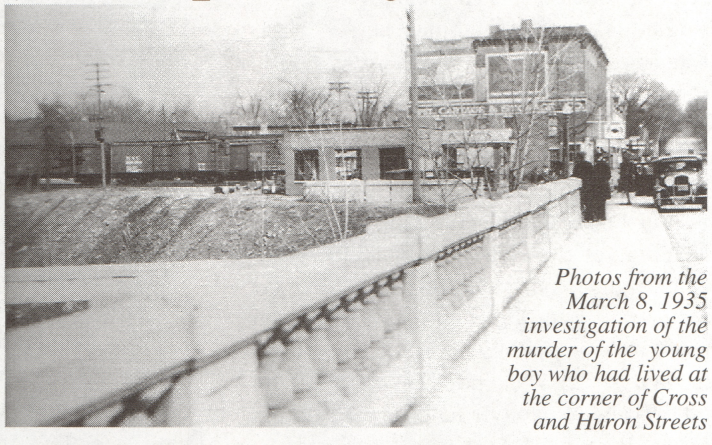
While serious historians stick to known facts and avoid passing on such stories for lack of proof, there is a body of contemporary journalists who claim such tales are just as important to the life of the community as historically accurate reports. "It's true," they say. "There *are* stories like that."

The Web site at www.ghosttowns.com proves disappointing in its listing of 80 places in Michigan. "Depot Town," "See Why," and "Whores Corner" are listed among ghostly attractions in the state. "Not much is known about Depot Town," it explains, "except that it got its name because of the rail depot." What a disappointment.

To supplement that meager report, this month we offer up a collection of tales that just will not fade away from Ypsilanti's old railroad district.

1935 cold case reopened by historians

Richard Streicher's body was found under the footbridge to Frog Island. He had been stabbed fourteen times.



Photos from the March 8, 1935 investigation of the murder of the young boy who had lived at the corner of Cross and Huron Streets

There are still people in the neighborhood who remember playing around the footbridge to Frog Island when eight-year-old Richard Streicher's body was found there on March 8, 1935. Their classmate lived in the big Greek revival house at 404 N. Huron Street, just a few hundred yards from the bridge. Streicher had been seen the night before sledding down the hill into Riverside Park. The murderer was never found.

In his investigation last year for the Ypsilanti Historical Society's *Gleanings*, George Ridenour noted, "the most puzzling questions arose when we filed Freedom of Information Act requests..." No records could be found with Michigan State Police, City of Ypsilanti Police, St. Joseph Mercy Hospital, Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department, University of Michigan, Washtenaw County Prosecuting Attorney.

Since that time, Ridenour reports a helpful response from Michigan State Police and intends to follow up on their lead in this lingering case. Subsequent *Gleanings* may yet solve the terrible murder.

Ypsi/Arbor rivalry not a recent issue

From the *Ypsilanti Commercial*, 16 March 1888

A ghost! A ghost!

About a year ago one of the Ann Arbor papers published an authentic (?) account of the doings of a ghost in the Court House there, and ever since, the Athens of America has been all puffed up because it had a sort of monopoly of the ghost business. But now it must come down. It has a competitor.

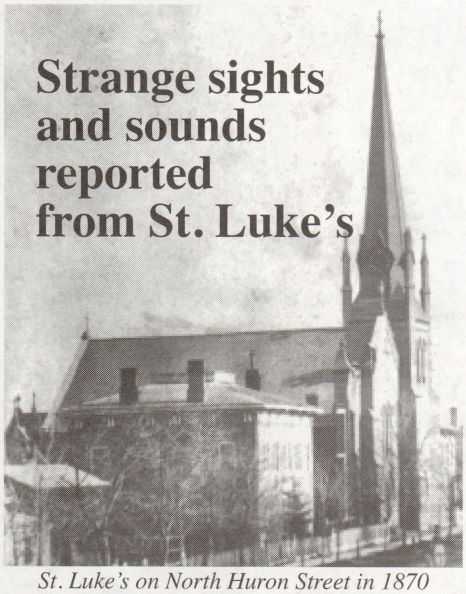
Ypsilanti is at present the possessor of a copyrighted ghost, all rights reserved. Let no other town think they can take it away from us. This, our one and only apparition, appears on the streets of a night. It is from nine to twelve feet high, affects black garments, and wears sometimes a black mask. It has been seen by several people we learn, principally in the fifth ward, but twice on Adams street.

A large reward is not offered for its capture, dead or alive. Guesses as to what it is are in order. It may be some open masquerading on stilts to frighten timid people, it may be a ghost, it may be wind; can't tell.

Its evident preference for the fifth ward is, to say the least, suggestive. In the mean time, let Ann Arbor remember that it is not the only city in Washtenaw that has spirit.

Ypsilanti's spooky traditions continue...

Strange sights and sounds reported from St. Luke's



St. Luke's on North Huron Street in 1870

"Slowly she turned…"

Kathy Wade tells of painting the wall in the hallway outside St. Luke's basement kitchen while the Ypsilanti Singers were rehearsing upstairs. "I was singing along with their tune when I heard somebody clear his throat behind me. I kept painting—and singing—until it happened a second time. Figuring somebody didn't like my singing, I turned slowly, fully expecting to see a pair of feet close behind me. But there was nobody there.

"I went on painting and the sound came again. I looked again and, seeing nobody in the hallway again, I was so uncomfortable that I picked up my painting gear and went into the kitchen to clean my brushes.

"When I came back into the hallway, it was pitch black. I went outside and found the sun was still shining brightly. I had been painting earlier with no lights on since the natural light had been sufficient."

Same tune—three times

St. Luke's organist, Mary Ann Balduff, reports three instances of ghostly encounters. First, she saw a "ghostly shadow shape" where the choir had to go up steps to the stage of the Little Theater for rehearsal. "A strange breeze" came through, but there were no windows open. "I called out" and saw a white-ish grey shape hovering at the top of the stairs. Second, while working in the music library, she heard heavy footfalls and creaking floors. Again, she called "Who's there?" but, with no reply, she packed up and left. In her third encounter, she was practicing on the piano when she heard a "humming" behind her—close enough to feel the breath on the back of her neck. "The wheezing was right behind me, but I could see nothing. I got up and left."

Blithe Spirit seen by two

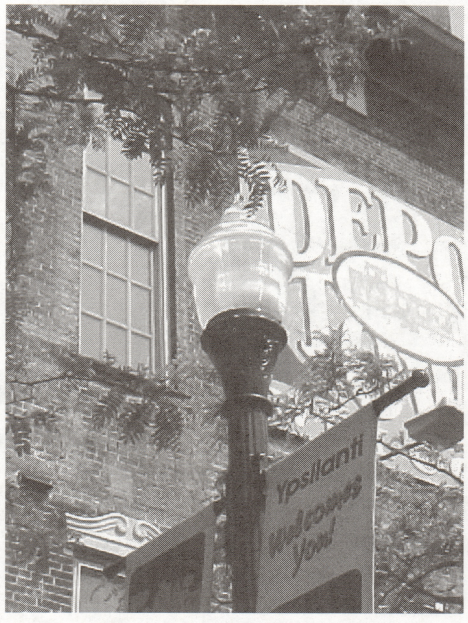
"It was during a production of *Blithe Spirit,* I was directing," remembers Kathleen Conat. "A crew member named Pam was on the stage; I was below. Actors were just arriving.

"A man walked from behind the flat and looked around the set. He was dark-haired, cut short and combed back. Not very tall; slim and compact. He was dressed in a dark single-breasted suit and there was something about the cut of it and the collar of his shirt that made me immediately think '1920s.'

"No one said anything. He did not acknowledge Pam, just looked around before turning and walking behind the flat again.

"Pam yelled, 'Hey!' I climbed the stairs to the green room and no one passed me that way. Pam and I checked the green room before retracing her route back to the tech guys. They had no idea what we were talking about. No one had passed by them except Pam."

"The whole incident couldn't have lasted more than a minute and a half."



The venerable Follett House: Quinn's Essentials, Dennis's Music Shop, Silver Spoon Antiques, Gordon's Five & Dime,

One hoax that never got off the ground

When Jerry Meadows discovered a soldier's mutilated tunic beneath the floorboards of the Follett House ballroom during his period of co-ownership of that building in the 1970s, he found a voice for the fanciful story of its origin in his comical character, "Perfesser Malarkey." The "Perfesser" made many appearances in the rehabilitation of Depot Town at that time and always told stories purported to be "true" and entertaining. In the style of a medicine show pitchman, "Malarkey" used the jacket as a prop for a complicated tale of a soldier returning from the Civil War and involved in the popular entertainments held in that upstairs room.

Details changed at every telling and the events did not exactly fit with known histories, but Malarkey's pontification was such a delightful entertainment that no one ever challenged the "Perfesser's" veracity.

Meadows later collected a great sum in a legal action and has been living in Nice, France ever since. If he ever returns, this generation of Depot Town kids may still line up on the sidewalks to hear him tell of the "War Veteran Ghost at the Follett House."

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Lack of resolution in serial murder case fosters horrific visions

In 1969, John Norman Collins was found guilty of killing an 18-year-old EMU coed. He was suspected of killing other young women as well, but was never tried after his first conviction. One of his alleged victims apparently haunts the place where she was killed, the *Ypsilanti Press* reported in 1983.

On LeForge Road, just a mile north of Depot Town, there was an abandoned farmhouse in which the woman was assaulted. She was then dragged across the road to a ruined barn. During full moon people claim to have seen something running back and forth between the two buildings. They say it is the girl trying to escape her fate.

The house and barn were demolished years ago, but this macabre legend persisted as long as the twin concrete silos remained. The silos are gone now and the land is occupied by a new post-modern subdivision. *None of the current inhabitants have heard or seen anything to corroborate the story.*

Ouija board sends a clue

Times were tense in Ypsilanti by the time the last murder in the series was committed. Bon Rose Fine stayed in EMU's Downing Hall and, when one of the girls did not return for the 11 p.m. curfew. Fine remembers the shared concerns among the residents.

"We got out a Ouija Board and asked where she was. The board replied, 'In the basement.' We asked who was in the basement and the Board responded, "The body of the girl who couldn't get out."

Next day the body of the girl was discovered and police suspected she was the last of a series of murder victims attributed to EMU student John Norman Collins.

Collins was convicted in the murder of Karen Sue Beineman, one of seven victims in the "Co-Ed Murders" that occurred here from 1967-1969. Even though he has gotten fat, changed his name, and been traded off to a prison in Ontario, his time in Ypsilanti will be long remembered.

The Gilbert Mansion echoed the Quirk Mansion across the Huron River and their families sent signals back and forth from the tall towers on dark and stormy nights

Every town must have its stereotypical "house on haunted hill"

Few towns can boast such a perfect setting for a ghost story as Ypsilanti with its famed Gilbert Mansion at 227 N. Grove. Its mansard roof, tall chimneys, and looming tower call out for tales of otherworldliness.

William H. Gilbert built his spectacular Second Empire home on a knoll overlooking a scenic curve in the Michigan Central Railroad as it approaches Depot Town from Detroit. Colorful gardens, ponds, and waterfalls from a spring on the property made the entire countenance a showplace. While some might think this a strange place for a house of such style and dignity, Gilbert enjoyed the view—because he was a high official with the MCRR.

Mrs. Gilbert regularly opened the house to the children of her neighborhood at Halloween so they could climb to the top of the four-story tower to survey the city's many-towered skyline.

Even in its declining years of disrepair, the

Gilbert Mansion maintained its dignity and fostered stories worth repeating. Although the place was uninhabited for several years, some contend there were other kinds of inhabitants in that grand edifice.

When the Boys & Girls Club occupied that building and played basketball in the former dining room, Randy Carpenter was the handyman who strove to maintain the failing structure. He reports sleeping on the floor after working late and waking to find his heavy toolbox moved and hidden elsewhere in the building. Carpenter and others testify to hearing "strange noises" throughout the building, but have never made visual contact with anything suspicious.

In later years the Gilbert Mansion was converted to elegant apartments and, since the central chimney collapsed in 1990, nothing more has been heard from this apparition. Perhaps it was crushed by the tons of bricks cascading to the basement.

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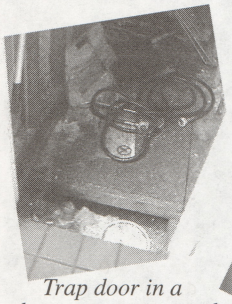
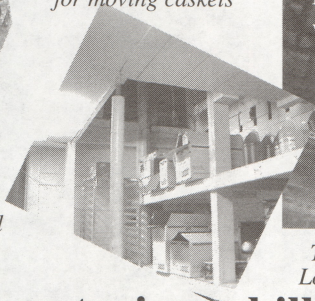
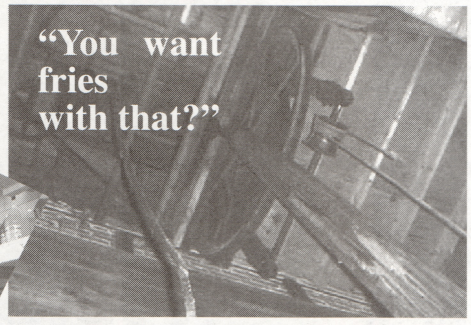


Trap door in a closet over an unused stairway leads to the former crematorium



Opening in ceiling of storage room shows elevator shaft used for moving caskets



The elevator's gone; we just got the shaft: Looking up to the rope-operated mechanism

Cady's crematorium chills current staff

"Cold spots" in the back room. "A decidedly creepy-crawly feeling in the basement." That's how employees at one of our neighborhood businesses describe the eerie atmosphere at their workplace, Cady's Grill and Bar at 36 East Cross.

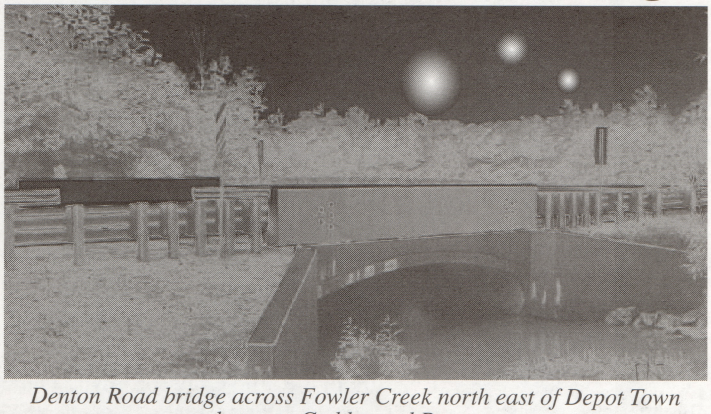
"Maybe that's because part of this building was a funeral parlor," said manager Bob Roberts and his waiter earlier this past summer. Parts of the crematorium are still in the basement, they say. Older customers have told of attending funerals here years ago and their stories—along with perceived physical/emotional manifestations—have caused a level of discomfort among some regular customers and several of the employees.

"None of our crew likes to have to go down to the basement," says Roberts.

"Stand in the back door at 10:30 p.m." says Cady's waiter, "and you'll know there's some kind of morbid past that hangs over this place."

All these characteristics are founded on the reality of a funeral home once occupying the eastern bay of the popular restaurant. Manager Roberts points out the basement room where cremations happened before modern regulations upgraded the process. "You can still see the elevator shaft in the back that took the caskets between floors," he observes.

"Floating Lights" legend at Denton Road bridge may recall a familial tragedy



Denton Road bridge across Fowler Creek north east of Depot Town between Geddes and Proctor.

It's the old urban legend department: Local paper interviews witness who remains anonymous and quotes others without verification

["Doctored" photo]

Randi Weiner reported on the Denton Road Bridge "floating lights" in 1983 in the *Ypsilanti Press*. High schoolers had been hiding out at the bridge to see ghostly reenactments of a domestic dispute turned to multiple murder. After shooting his wife and killing her lover, an angry husband killed their baby and himself at the bridge. Since that horrific event, the ghosts are said to return to the bridge at night.

In the next *Rag*

What will we tell the tots at Thanksgiving? Extremely local "Indian Lore" in this area is recalled with humility and no politics.Whatever happened to the *Real Hurons*?

Depot Town Rag

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Website: www.depottown.org
DTA meets at 6:30 p.m. on the third Wednesday of each month—except Aug and Sept—at Café Luwak, 42 East Cross Street.

Raffle winner gets 10 Gs

William Townsend, of Battery Park, VA, was in town in August for the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters confab at WCC. Jack Miller reports Townsend bought his ticket for the 1964 1/2 Mustang raffle at the UA Depot Town Cruise Night and won $10,000 in what turned out to be a fifty/fifty drawing—half of the proceeds of ticket sales. The remainder benefits the Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum.

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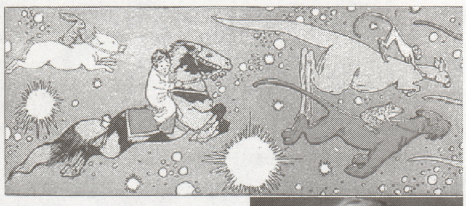

Master story-teller got creds in Ypsi

Winsor McCay, 1887-1934

McCay's popular Little Nemo

Born in Canada, Winsor McCay came to Ypsilanti's Cleary College in 1886 to study business, but fell in with John Goodison, a professor of geography and drawing at the Normal School (MSNC/EMU).

McCay left Ypsilanti for Chicago in 1889 to illustrate circus posters. By 1905, he was publishing a comic strip called "Little Nemo in Slumberland" in the *New York Herald* and the strip became one of the most popular comics in America.

Little Nemo stories followed the same unique plot of a child going to sleep and dreaming of fanciful adventures, but it was McCay's intricate drawings that achieved such great popularity as one of graphic design's most masterful story-teller/cartoonists.

McCay's fantasy-laden drawing style enjoyed a resurgence with the Flower Children of the Sixties when his style was reflected in Peter Max posters and on Beatles' album covers.

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Right: YFD Chief Alonzo H. Miller and mascot
Below: The Chief's car carried a water fire extinguisher on the running board
Source: 100 Year Centennial Celebration, *by James Mann*

Above: The Station's Italianate tower was used for drying out fire hoses
Left: Ypsilanti's 1925 Seagrave Pumper at the base of the "haunted tower"

Fire station ghost legend endures

Herb Miller has an extensive collection of stories about his grandfather, Alonzo Harrington Miller, who was Ypsilanti's third Fire Chief beginning in 1922. According to local firefighter legend, the chief's ghost walks the old tower on the third floor of the former fire station at 110 W. Cross Street.

"Whenever the wind blew," said YFD Captain Michael Philbin, "you could hear his bones creaking."

Former firefighter Charles Dickerson told the *Ypsilanti Press*, "The old fire station would howl and whistle. It sounded like a banshee. We always told the new firemen it was the ghost of Alonzo Miller."

"He was a tight old character," according to local firefighter lore. According to Captain Philbin, "He used to hold onto his pay checks until the city treasurer would complain that he was messing up the books."

Captain Philbin was so impressed with the Alonzo Miller legend that he recorded the story in verse in the style of James Whitcomb Riley:

"Lonzo's" curse

by Mike Philbin, YFD firefighter

Have you ever been in bed at night
With the wind a-blowin' away
And heard a kinda creepy noise
From the tower door, you say?
Not so, old timers tell ya
That's no tower door they rave.
That's tight old Lonzo Miller's bones
A-creakin' in his grave

A later report by Timothy Ehlen in the *Eastern Echo* claimed the wind comes into the three-story hose tower from a certain direction and creates "buzzing sounds" throughout the fire station. "It has even been known to happen that the main doors in front of Engine 52 will open of their own accord," the *Echo* reported.

Even though Ralph Crawford, who came on as Chief in 1966, replaced the weather stripping around those doors, Crawford said he felt "Miller is there to stay."

The legend of Ypsilanti Fire Chief Alonzo Miller continues to this day.

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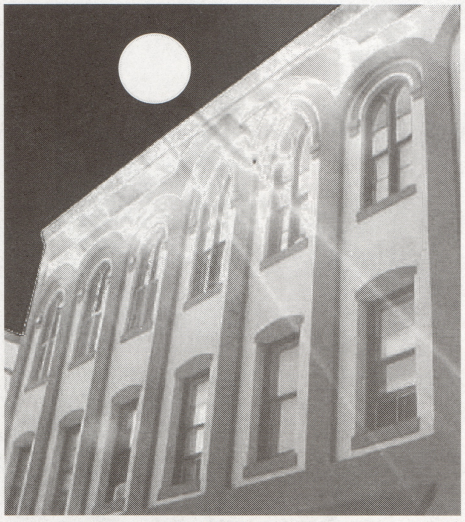

According to SEMGHS members, there's a female ghost living in the Newel Block

Local ghost search could continue

Looking for ghosts in the area? Former City Councilmember Beverly Fish is a member of the Southeastern Michigan Ghost Hunters Society and may be able to help you in your quest.

Fish says, "I can tell you about the spirit at Café Luwak. Our Astrologers and Friends group meets on Thursday nights there and we sometimes encounter the female ghost who lives in that building. We also had a visitation one night by a man who had been killed in a train accident. This was after hours when only four of us were there. It happened that the four were the psychics of the group."

Fish has been thinking of starting up a "ghost tour" of Depot Town. Interested parties may contact her through the Astrologers and Friends meet-up site: ghosts.meetup.com.

RAGTIME Coming events

29 September
Fallapalooza
Family Festival

Saturday, 7 October
Antique Truck Show
Riverside Park
Featuring ALL trucks from semis to pickups

26 October 5-7:30 p.m.
Downtown Halloween Extravaganza

1 December
Winter Shadow Art Fair
Corner Brewery
One day, 40 local artists. Unique holiday gifts, support local artists, hear great music

1 December
Depot Town Winterfest
5 p.m. Christmas Window Judging

31 December

New Year Jubilee
family events in Depot Town and downtown locations

Something stinks at the Museum

"...It was then that I became aware of a whiff of perfume," said George Ridenour in "Scent of Minerva" in the summer 2007 issue of *Gleanings*, the quarterly publication of the Ypsilanti Historical Society. Ridenour was investigating the possibility of a "Gray Lady's" olfactory spirit reported at the museum over the years.

"In two of the rooms, I again smelled the distinct scent of perfume," he notes. Corroborated by other docents at the museum, Ridenour wonders, "was it a gentle reminder of the 37-year-old woman who had died in the house?"

Minerva Miles Dow died shortly after she and her husband had built the home at 220 N. Huron Street around 1860 that now serves as the Ypsilanti Historical Museum.

EMU's big ghost story was a hoax

Even Eastern Michigan University tries to get a good story going from time to time.

While a student at EMU, Tim Harrower wrote a phony news story: "The Ghost of Pease Auditorium" for the *Eastern Echo*. To this day, some EMU students still believe the building is haunted.

Harrower is now an award-winning editor, designer, and columnist at such newspapers as the *Times-Union* (Rochester, N.Y.) and *The Oregonian* (Portland, Ore.). He also consults on redesigns, lectures on journalism, and maintains a dog-and-frog ranch deep in the Oregon woods.

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